
Afghanistan and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization: Why They Both Matter

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[The following are excerpts of the remarks presented to the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Washington, D.C., February 4, 2008.]

Adenauer's historic achievement, of course, was to consolidate a functioning democracy in a country that had been ruled by evil men and destroyed by war – and to anchor that country firmly in Europe, and in a transatlantic alliance with the United States. He took a state that had seen itself as following a path apart from the democracies, which indeed had fought them in two horrific wars, and anchored that state squarely on democratic values. What Adenauer did, many thought impossible. In fact, they said so:

They said the German people were not ready for democracy, that a decade earlier they had rejected democratic government as decadent and depraved, and that they were too militarist to be trusted.

But, with a little help from some Allies, not only did Adenauer cement a democracy where totalitarianism had reigned, but a free market where corporatism had been the rule, and a commitment to peaceful relations with neighbors, where conflict had existed for centuries.

Now, there are huge differences between Germany and Afghanistan, from history to prosperity to culture to religion to geography. But there is one common aspect I want to stress – we Americans believed in the people of Germany. We did not give up on them. And that was the right call. And similarly, we must not give up on the people of Afghanistan. As difficult as the challenges now are, Afghanistan is the right cause, and one we should follow through on.

In this endeavor, we are fortunate that others share our commitment to helping the people of Afghanistan, fortunate that we are working there together with friends and allies. Our German friends have made major contributions. Together, we are all making a difference—a big difference, as I will describe later.

But, my friends, we must be honest with ourselves. The challenges in Afghanistan are great, and thus far, what we and the Afghans and our Allies have done to meet them has not been enough. This is a time for some courageous decisions. Afghanistan is a place that has been confronted with massive problems for a very long time. All of the world's troubles have been visited on it. It was as if the four horsemen of the apocalypse war, famine, strife and death, decided to practice first in Afghanistan.

An Overabundance of Security, Governance and Economic Problems Still Besets This Country

Topping the list is an aggressive insurgency, focused especially on Southern and Eastern Afghanistan. The Taliban and their ilk seek a twisted victory, by instigating fear among the Afghan people via road-side and suicide bombs. And their campaign of intimidation goes further than the Afghan people – they want to sow doubt among Afghanistan's Western friends by making success appear out of reach. There is another war going on in Afghanistan – a war for the confidence and trust of the Afghan people. The staggering growth of the illicit narcotics industry in recent years is both a cause and a symptom of the wider failure to govern effectively.

And the lack of security and good governance in some areas is a ball and chain. Even with the current vigorous annual growth that leads the South Asia region, it will take a generation for Afghanistan to emerge from severe poverty and underdevelopment.

But the enormity of the problems cannot deter us. Our own security depends on this, as do the hopes of the Afghan people. We need to fulfill our promise to the Afghan people: that those who want to reintroduce oppression and make the country once again a launching pad for attacks on civilization will never be allowed to return. We must be realistic about facing these challenges. Realistic, but not pessimistic. Let us be honest about the problems, but not talk ourselves into a self-fulfilling defeat. Amid the challenges, we have made some progress already. More is possible.

There is a debate sometimes about why we are in Afghanistan—whether to fight insurgents and terrorists, or to help Afghanistan rebuild and prosper. This is a false dichotomy: these are two sides of the same coin. Without the security and stability provided by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces, reconstruction, rule of law and effective governance would be impossible. There can be no development without security, and no security without development.

We must also reject some other myths about Afghanistan – for example, the idea that this is an American war that does not matter to Europe; or that there has been no progress whatsoever since the Taliban was ousted. It is understandable how these myths grow and spread. Nightly news reports show desperate acts by the Taliban and al Qaeda blowing up markets or schools, and taking hostages. The dangerous extremists we face know they cannot win in open battle or in an open debate of ideas. So they turn to terror instead. As rough as things may be, we must not be taken in by attempts to sow disillusionment and cynicism and fear. We and our Afghan Allies must not cede the ground in Afghanistan, nor the ground of ideas in public debate, to violent extremists.

Let me be clear about one thing concerning NATO:

We deeply value the contributions that all Allies and partners are making in Afghanistan. All told, 26 NATO Allies and 14 partners are contributing forces. Every single contribution is important, and no one's commitments of troops or funding or aid workers or trainers should be taken lightly. It is a common effort.

At the same time, we need to be honest that as a whole, our contributions are not enough, and they come with too many strings attached. Particularly as Allies, it is important that we share the burdens, and that we give our military commanders as much flexibility on the ground as possible, so they can do the job we have given them. NATO has taken on this task in Afghanistan, and it is critical that we give NATO the tools it needs to succeed.

This evening, as we face these serious challenges, I want to re-emphasize some basics. I hope to leave you this evening with three broad themes in mind:

- First, the security and well-being of our societies of all of us in the transatlantic community depends on our efforts in Afghanistan. We must not allow the Taliban and al Qaeda to re-impose their rule in Afghanistan and thus present a major long-term threat to people in that country and our own societies.
- Second, we must recognize that the hopes of the Afghan people for a long-term, stable, secure, more prosperous future depend on the assistance we can give them. We are doing the right thing in Afghanistan, and we cannot turn our backs on the Afghan people and allow those who brutalized them before to return.

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- And third, despite the major problems and challenges we see today, we have produced some solid results in Afghanistan and, ultimately, we can succeed. This is not an effort in vain, but a good investment in Afghanistan, in our own societies, and in the world.

Let me start with the first point:

Our well-being depends upon what we do in Afghanistan. It is important that we start with the security and well-being of our own societies, not because we are selfish, but because we are democracies, and that is what our voters demand.

When I talk about security I am not referring to some abstract concept, to a subject treated in army field manuals or studied in graduate courses where they make you read Clausewitz. No, I am talking about the security of our children, their safety as they go back and forth from home to school. The security of our homes here in Washington or Hamburg, Barcelona or Paris, New York or London. Afghanistan is the number one supplier of opium and heroin to Europe. As opium production has risen in Afghanistan, it increasingly impacts the young people of Europe, sowing addiction, disease and death, and draining Europe's economic resources.

Opiate overdose is one of the leading causes of death among the young people in Europe, particularly among urban males. Germany alone had more than 1,385 overdoses in 2006, the year for which we have the latest figures. A German study noted that the combined public and insurer cost of treating addiction exceeds 540 million euros a year.

I am talking about the security of average Europeans. Terrorists are looking increasingly to Europe for opportunities to attack. The Madrid train bombings of March 2004, which killed 119 and wounded more than 600, were undertaken by the Abu Hafs al-Masri Brigade, better known as the Secret Organization of al Qaeda in Europe. The London bombings of July 2005, which left 52 dead and more than 770 injured, also could be traced to this group.

So that is point one: our own security and well-being depends on what we do in Afghanistan.

My second message is that our help is vital to the Afghan people. We cannot abandon Afghanistan's 31 million people to the likes of the Taliban and al Qaeda ever again. We cannot give people hope, and then walk away, leaving them at the hands of their oppressors. From the time of the Soviet invasion in 1979 until 2001, Afghans constituted the world's single largest refugee group. With more than 6 million refugees around the world, Afghans were the single largest draw on the resources of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). In December 2000, the UNHCR noted that more than 5 million Afghan refugees depended on humanitarian assistance to survive and more than 3.8 million relied on the World Food Program for the daily sustenance.

Today, according to the UNHCR, more than 4 million Afghan refugees have returned home (since 2002). And the homecomings have continued. The BBC reported that more than 100,000 Afghan refugees returned home this past summer. While we face serious security and narcotics challenges in southern Afghanistan, the picture is not homogeneous throughout the country. In the east, once the most troubled region, we have made significant gains against insurgents by applying and coordinating civilian and military counterinsurgency efforts. And throughout most of Afghanistan, where security and governance are improving, the Afghan people have demonstrated that they are ready and willing to turn away from illicit poppy.

In 2007, opium poppy production grew overall to a record high – and that is a very troubling fact. We must do better. It is worth noting, however, that this increase is due to rapid growth in Helmand and a few other areas. We saw fifteen provinces stay or become poppy-free, and we expect even more provinces will enter this category in 2008. We need to expand these gains, and increase our efforts against the Taliban, and the drug-kingpins who support them, especially in the south.

Another aspect is the reconstruction and development of the nation. We need to remember what we saw when the Taliban ran Afghanistan:

A violent, repressive regime that stoned women to death or poured acid on their faces, lashed men for not praying sufficient times per day and barred girls from attending schools. Women died because this wretched regime banned gynecologists. The Taliban had banned kite flying and the singing of songs, and blew up ancient monuments that had survived the armies of Alexander, Ghengis Khan and Timerlame. Afghanistan under the Taliban was a war-shattered country with a brutal regime that had no hope of progress.

In 2001, 8 percent of Afghans had access to a limited form of healthcare. Today we have built and outfitted over 670 hospitals and clinics, and more than 65 percent of the population has access to medical care. Almost 11,000 doctors, midwives, and nurses have been trained. We went into Afghanistan and liberated it from the Taliban and al Qaeda, only some 900,000 children were enrolled in school. Today there are more than 5 million students in that country. More than 1.5 million of them are girls. We know the exact number of girls were in school in 2001 because that number was zero. We are helping Afghans realize their own vision of their future. We are enabling them to have normal lives again. It is for Afghans to fulfill their dreams and govern their own country. But it should be our contribution to build roads and help them secure the gains they have made.

This brings me to the third and final theme I want to leave you with. Despite the immense challenges in Afghanistan, the Afghan people, with our help and that of Allies like Germany, can succeed. We have seen some progress already, as I described. But we must give a careful look at our own efforts today, make changes where necessary, but ultimately re-invest in the security and development of the country. What should we be doing differently? What more is needed today to help Afghanistan? There is a long list of needs:

More police trainers. Better coordination of international assistance efforts. More military liaison and training teams helping the Afghan military. Helicopters and maneuver forces. Additional reconstruction and development resources. This is just to name a few.

For our part, President Bush recently announced his decision to send a further 3,200 Marines and \$23 billion in assistance. We urge other Allies also to increase their commitments, for example, to provide forces to replace these marines when they complete their tour in late 2008. We look forward to working with Germany, other NATO Allies, the E.U., and any others who share our vision of hope and want to help Afghanistan succeed. Germany itself is proof that the past does not always predict the future, and that experiments, and courageous, even unpopular, decisions can succeed.